

[26th August 1925]

APPENDIX V.

[Vide answer to question No. 459 asked by Mr. J. A. Saldanha at the meeting of the Legislative Council held on the 26th August 1925, page 778 supra.]

The Andaman Islands.

I

There is so much ignorance and misconception with regard to the health, climate and agricultural possibilities of the Andamans that a few facts and figures may perhaps be welcomed by the general public.

Health.—At a recent public meeting, held at Madras on July 12th, a resolution was passed in which it was stated that the Andaman Islands “have been pronounced to be uninhabitable for human being.” The resolution added that the sending of Mappillas there would “wreck the moral, material and social well-being of the emigrants.”

It is true that the Jail Committee, which visited these islands in January 1920, put on record that the settlement was unhealthy. But they were relying mainly on figures and statistics. And the statistics certainly bore out their contention in certain respects.

It must be remembered, however, that war conditions were still hardly at an end; the islands had for six years been consistently short of their proper medical establishment; and the pandemic of influenza in 1918 and 1919 had taken its full toll here as elsewhere.

One of the great reasons for the ill-health of the settlement had been malaria. This disease had, for many years, caused an average of one admission to hospital per annum for every convict, and of 60 per cent of the total admissions from all causes.

Efforts to reduce malaria in the earlier years of this century had not met with much success; large airy barracks were built on the tops of the bluffs close to the sea, so that the inmates should have the benefit of the presumably healthy sea breezes, but the malaria continued.

Then, in 1912, at the request of Government, Colonel Christophers, I.M.S., went to Port Blair to investigate the malaria problem, and proved that the most important carrier of malaria was a mosquito which bred in the salt swamps bordering the sea and close to the barracks.

Acting on his advice, certain of the worst stations were removed bodily to healthy sites inland, and measures were taken—as far as funds permitted—to drain the swamps. The remarkable effect of the latter measure may be seen in the following table, which shows the result, on the women convicts, of draining a large swamp close to the headland on which their parklike quarters were situated:—

Year.	Admissions for malaria.	Ratio per cent of admission to population.
1913	581	206·76
1917	332	120·73
1918	130	48·15

NOTE.—The reclamation of the said swamp was begun in 1913 and completed in 1917.

The headland has now become so healthy that the buildings on it have been converted into the High school for Port Blair.

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The Jail Committee's report also states "The climatic conditions will always be unfavourable to the health of the convicts, *drawn as they are from various parts of India.*" The latter part of the sentence has been italicised because the climatic conditions are *not* unfavourable to people, such as the Mappillas, who have been accustomed all their lives to an almost identical climate.

In the course of their enquiry, the Jail Committee stressed the fact that, whereas the death-rate in Indian jails during the previous ten years had been 21.25 per mille, that of Port Blair had been 25.23. The then S.M.O. in his reply, said that, if the swamps could be reclaimed, the hospitals properly equipped, and an efficient and sufficient medical staff appointed, he saw no reason why the death-rate should not be reduced to 25.00 per mille.

That was in January 1920. What actually happened? In spite of the fact that swamp reclamation progressed very slowly and that the extra hospital equipment did not begin to arrive till the end of 1921, a period of great improvement set in.

The daily sick-rate, which was 77.76 per mille in 1919, fell to 66.26 in 1920 and to 49.60 in 1921.

The admissions to hospital showed a reduction of 34 per cent on the average of the previous 30 years.

The total number of days spent in hospitals was so reduced in 1921 that—compared with 1919—over Rs. 50,000 were saved in labour alone.

Finally, the death-rate from disease, which was 44.36 in 1919, fell to 38.38 in 1920 and to 15.92 in 1921.

Thus, not only was the S.M.O.'s optimistic forecast more than fulfilled, but the 1921 vital statistics of the Andamans were better than those of the jails of *any* province in India.

A great deal of this improvement was due to the lessened incidence of malaria. Compared with the average for the previous 30 years, admissions for malaria in 1921 were 3.6 per cent less, and deaths 63.7 less.

The reduction of malaria in recent years has been really remarkable, as the following figures show:—

Year.	Admissions for malaria.
1919	14,828
1920	10,060
1921	5,618 (only 15 deaths)
1922 (about)	2,600

and this improvement has been maintained.

Coincident with the reduction in malaria was an equally welcome reduction in other diseases.

The figures for the last year are not at present available, but it is known that, among a convict population of about 8,500, the daily sick-rate never reached 400, even in the unhealthiest period of the year, and that the average sick-rate over a consecutive period of quite five months did not exceed 250.

It appears, therefore, from the above figures that the Jail Committee's adverse report—however justifiable on the records of the past—is hardly applicable to present conditions; while the statement that the islands are "uninhabitable for human beings" is untrue.

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II

The first note described how great a scourge to the settlement malaria had been, and how great a reduction had been effected in recent years. In addition to malaria, there are two other diseases of much importance; they are dysentery and consumption. But these diseases are not peculiar to Port Blair; they are common to All-India. And, as a set-off to them, it is well to note the immunity which the Andaman Islands possess from many other diseases which are a scourge in India itself. They are absolutely free from plague, cholera, smallpox, hydrophobia, kala-azar, typhus and relapsing fever, while enteric fever and hookworm diseases (apart from imported cases) are almost non-existent.

When we think of the toll taken annually by these diseases in the Madras Presidency, we must agree that there is much to be said for the Andamans. The Medical department of the Andamans is fully alive to the dangers of the three main diseases mentioned and are fighting them energetically. Recently, a League of Health (on the lines of that suggested by Doctor Lankester in his book, "Tuberculosis in India") has been started at Port Blair, and its members include not only officials, free residents and boy-scouts, but also self-supporter convicts. Its aim is to improve the health of the population generally by educating all in the prevention of disease, in sanitation, first-aid, maternity and child-welfare. Similarly, recent research having shown that the strong, damp-laden winds of the south-west monsoon favour the spread of consumption measures are now being taken to locate all new villages on the north-east slopes of the hills where they will be protected from such wind.

It was said (with reference to the Anglo-Indian Colonists) that they would be miles away from the nearest medical assistance. Such a statement is both misleading and inaccurate. In addition to the two main hospitals on Ross and Haddo (both of which have male and female wards for free Indian patients) there are smaller hospitals and dispensaries located at all important stations throughout the settlement. Two new dispensaries have been opened this year to attend to the needs of the new Mappilla villages.

Climate.

The Andaman Islands are *not* (as was once told to the writer) "bare rocks nowhere more than 10 feet above the level of the sea"; they are one of the most beautiful spots in our Indian Empire, and might well be described as the "Pearls of the Orient". Their climate is almost exactly like that of Malabar. The annual rainfall is 115 inches, compared with Malabar's 117 and the mean temperature of each is from 70 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Both have a steady sea-breeze throughout the south-west monsoon, with heavy rain and a lighter and drier breeze from the north west in December and January.

Each has its own malarial problem, but in this respect they differ, the malaria of Malabar being inland at the foot-hills of the Wynad, whereas that of the Andamans is on the sea. From the point of view of Mappilla emigration, therefore, the climate is ideal.

A recent speaker against such emigration instanced, in support of his argument, the fact that the first experiment in colonizing Anglo-Indians at Port Blair proved a failure. This is no argument against *Mappillas* going to the Andamans. In the first place, not one of that batch of Anglo-Indians had any knowledge of agriculture, whereas *Mappillas* will be in their own

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element in this respect. Then, no proper medical examination of the Anglo-Indians had been made before despatch, with the result that three of the twelve had to be sent back almost at once on medical grounds. Lastly, they had to do work done elsewhere by coolies, and the average Anglo-Indian is not suited for this in a tropical climate.

But, for the usual work of an Anglo-Indian or European in India, the climate of Port Blair is not too trying, and it is one of the few places in our Indian Empire where European women and children can remain all the year round without definite ill-effects on their health. In an experience of 6½ years there, the writer was only off-duty for two weeks.

Agriculture, etc.—In Malabar, the staple means of livelihood are agriculture, fishing, wood-cutting, oil-pressing, rice-growing, making paper, leaf hats and umbrellas, rearing cattle, and growing areca-nut and coconut palms, plantains, pepper, ginger, tea and coffee, jack and mango fruits, etc. All these industries are suitable in the Andamans, and have been started already in the cleared areas, while cane-sugar also grows luxuriantly.

At present, the main sources of revenue are the forests and coconuts. A million tons of excellent forest woods await cutting yearly, but only the fringe of the forests can yet be touched for want of labour. Within these virgin forests lie rich valleys, eminently suited for growing the varied produce to which the Mappillas are accustomed. The country consists, in fact, mainly of hills and valleys enclosed by an extensive seaboard where splendid fishing may be obtained.

Enough has, we hope, been said to show that neither the Mappillas nor their altruistic friends need anticipate starvation, penury or an early death for anyone who has the courage and initiative to start a new life in the Andamans.

COIMBATORE, }
20th July 1925. }

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